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Supporting and Enabling Scholarship: Developing and Sharing Expertise in Online Learning and Teaching

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ABSTRACT

In a highly competitive, rapidly changing higher education market, universities need to be able to generate pedagogical expertise quickly and ensure that it is applied to practice. Since teaching approaches are constantly evolving, partly responding to emerging learning technologies, there is a need to foster ways to keep abreast on an ongoing basis. This paper explores how a small-scale project, the Teaching Online Panel (TOP), used scholarship investigations and a bottom-up approach to enhance one particular aspect of academic practice – online learning and teaching. The experiences of TOP are useful for identifying:

- how a scholarship approach can help develop academic expertise
- its contribution to enhancing understanding of staff's different roles in the University
- ways of developing the necessary supportive network for those undertaking such scholarship
- the effectiveness of staff development which is peer-led rather than imposed from above
- how practical examples can stimulate practice development
- the relevance of literature on communities of practice and landscapes of practice for scholarship
- the important role of 'brokers' to facilitate the dissemination of scholarship findings
- the benefits to the brokers' own professional roles
- the challenges of sustaining such an approach and lessons learnt.

This study has relevance for those involved in supporting scholarship or delivering staff development in Higher Education.

Keywords: supporting scholarship; communities of practice; landscape of practice; staff development; online learning and teaching; brokers.

Introduction

Online learning and teaching is an area of academic practice which is subject to rapid and ongoing change – to which universities must respond. It is vital for educators to keep abreast of the digital skills and pedagogically sound ways to deliver effective learning experiences that will appeal to students in a competitive marketplace. Yet, when it comes to using technology in their teaching, staff capabilities can vary tremendously. Lack of confidence with the 'tools' and approaches, and scepticism over their potential can obstruct the integration of teaching and 'tool'.

In addition, for many academics the motivation driving their teaching is the content of their subject-discipline rather than digital pedagogies. Some staff may also be working in relative isolation. Furthermore, there can be a distance between researchers and practitioners, making it difficult to directly influence practice. Therefore, the challenge is how to advance understanding about digital pedagogies to deliver technology-enhanced-learning, and how to share and develop this understanding on an ongoing basis.

A scholarship model offers the possibility of addressing such staff development needs. This paper explores a scholarship approach used by the Teaching Online Panel (TOP), which went some way to meeting the challenges of how best to:

- support scholarship investigations when people are dispersed across the UK and mostly working independently
- maintain motivation for completing small, ongoing projects
- share good practice promptly within an evolving environment
- share understanding of each other's practice in settings where staff perform different, but intersecting roles.

The TOP approach, with its emphasis on the importance of a support network, fits well with the academic literature on 'communities of practice' (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) and 'landscapes of practice' (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015a). Based on TOP's experiences, we highlight the vital role played by 'brokers' who motivated workers to share their knowledge through completing projects. The brokers then operated between the different areas of the institution to ensure the findings reached relevant audiences.

This approach does not come without challenges and our reflections offer suggestions about how future scholarship initiatives can prepare to meet these.

Background

The context

This scholarship approach was initiated in the Open University's (OU) Faculty of Health and Social Care (FHSC). The University has a large student population, where much of the study is via online distance-learning. Its modules are designed and written by 'central academics' based at the Milton Keynes campus, whilst the teaching support to students is given by tutors (known as 'Associate Lecturers'), who are distributed across the UK and work from home. Tutors' duties include tutorial delivery, one-to-one student support, and assignment marking. The OU has several thousand tutors, who are line-managed by Staff Tutors based across the UK. Staff Tutors have regular contact with their tutors, supporting them formally and informally in their teaching delivery and their staff development needs.

The University's size, and the geographical distribution of these three staff groups, posed particular challenges when the FHSC was launching a new high-population module. The module was designed to introduce online learning for the first time and, as a key entry-point for Faculty programmes, it was crucial the learning experience should be high quality. The challenges included:

- lack of staff expertise in effective online pedagogy
- rapidly emerging technological tools
- difficulty of delivering staff development to a large geographically dispersed tutor audience
- gaps in the feedback loop between students, tutors and central academics
- difficulty in facilitating cross-faculty interaction to share ideas about online tuition
- reluctance to adopt online working by some tutors, Staff Tutors, and central academics.

A scholarship model was introduced to help meet these challenges. The strategy was to pilot a small-scale version of the module and subsequently in 2006 to form a small group of tutors (TOP) to carry out scholarship projects for harnessing and developing expertise in online tutoring. TOP's findings could then be cascaded to shape and inform practice more widely across a range of staff roles. TOP was to be guided by a steering group of central academics and Staff Tutors, creating a meeting ground for representatives from all three staff groups.

TOP's approach has similarities with earlier initiatives by educators and academic developers, for example, in the OU in Scotland (Cowan, George, & Pinheiro-Torres, 2004; George, Cowan, & Gibbs, 1997). Here a framework was created for tutors to undertake and share action research to inform good practice in supporting students' learning. Through this work, Cowan et al. (2004) highlighted the ongoing challenges of disseminating research more widely across a large and dispersed organisation.

In this paper, we consider the TOP initiative as an exemplar for enabling and disseminating scholarship which uses a bottom-up approach. We apply the theoretical lenses of 'communities of practice' and 'landscapes of practice', reflecting on how the TOP initiative informed practice across the University and the implications for other Higher Education scholarship initiatives.

Background Literature

The concept of communities of practice has successfully been applied to higher education. Cambridge, Kaplan, and Suter (2005) have developed a *Community of Practice Design Guide* for supporting the growth of communities of practice in higher education. They refer to the benefits as connecting people, ensuring dialogue and co-learning, disseminating knowledge and producing new knowledge, cultivating collaborative working, and encouraging people to organise. Buckley and Du Toit (2010) point to the importance of universities developing communities of practice amongst academic staff to meet the challenges of a competitive higher education market under financial pressures.

In recent years, recognising that single communities of practice do not act in isolation, Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015a) have stressed the existence of landscapes of practice. That is, when people act, for example, as educators they are part of a larger landscape, involved in multiple communities of practice. Those inhabiting the landscape may be members of several communities and may act as brokers between communities (Kubiak et al., 2015).

TOP operated as a community of practice connecting and overlapping with other communities within a university-based landscape of practice.

The TOP model approach

How TOP was set up

TOP initially comprised three tutors who carried out small-scale scholarship investigations aimed at developing knowledge and understanding about what makes for effective online tuition. Each investigation required the worker to reflect on and explore their own and colleagues' practices and, where appropriate, to contextualise this within the relevant literature.

An email 'call' for TOP work was circulated to tutors, inviting applications, outlining suggested themes for investigation and detailing expectations of the role. Tutors applied by submitting a proposal to investigate an online learning and teaching topic of interest to them. The topic also had to align with Faculty objectives, which were broadly defined. Ethical considerations were taken into account and, where necessary, clearance sought by TOP Steering Group members before a project was approved or started. Successful applicants were offered ten days' work, spread across one year, to carry out investigations, produce reports of findings and attend meetings. On completion, they could apply to do a further investigation. Findings were reported initially to the relevant module team, tutors and Staff Tutors and later to the wider Faculty. One of the original workers was appointed as Convenor to ensure a regular dialogue with and between TOP members and to co-ordinate TOP activity. The team expanded in 2009 to include six workers – representing a greater range of subject disciplines and modules.

TOP operated for nine years until 2015 when scholarship initiatives became more streamlined across the University. Some of the Steering Group and workers then drew on TOP scholarship to inform their individual submissions for Higher Education Academy accreditation. Such accreditation has become a key focus for engaging staff university-wide in reflecting on their practice and therefore serves as a widely available route to undertaking scholarship.

The TOP support network

A steering group was formed and was responsible for recruiting and guiding TOP workers, and disseminating findings to a wider audience. It met four times a year with the workers, the meetings offering a rare opportunity for staff in different roles and from different parts of the University to discuss online practices and any issues identified.

Sixteen people in total (approximately seven at a time) served on the TOP Steering Group with several long-term members, including two of this paper's authors. The group members, central academics and Staff Tutors, including some from outside the Faculty, were appointed for their expertise in staff development, research, and teaching and learning, including online teaching. The group advised TOP workers on the research approaches of their investigations – important because some workers had limited experience of conducting postgraduate research or scholarship investigations.

Steering Group members also provided general advice and feedback, including critically reading TOP workers' draft investigation reports. In addition, they could access dissemination channels, allowing them to report findings to Faculty bodies and identify opportunities for TOP workers to share their expertise directly. The Steering Group meetings helped motivate workers to complete successive stages of their investigations.

Between Steering Group meetings support was offered through group and individual meetings with the Convenor, and through workers with shared interests collaborating on projects. Since the workers were distributed across the UK, distance precluded face-to-face meetings. Despite this, they supported each other over a number of years by telephone conference calls, a synchronous online meeting tool, an online forum, a wiki and a website. TOP involved thirteen tutors, over nine years, demonstrating the project's continuity and longevity.

Investigations undertaken and results

The Faculty's objectives for TOP investigations were broadly couched, allowing tutors to submit proposals arising from their work with students. TOP proposals often emerged out of issues or observations identified by tutors as part of their everyday practice. For example, one TOP worker wished to facilitate more effective collaborative work on study skills and systematically investigated the potential of different online tools for this. She was then able to make more informed, evidence-based, practice decisions. Thus, investigations were of immediate relevance to TOP workers' own current identified needs and those of the wider tutor community.

The TOP scholarship investigations included:

- a comparison of a wiki and an online forum for revision
- an exploration of how forum size affects participation
- an account of how tutors learn to tutor online
- suggestions for establishing supportive online forums
- a guide to support interactive synchronous tuition
- ideas for moderating large-scale forums
- advice on optimal tutor intervention in forum discussion
- an exploration of small group work in synchronous online tutorials (use of 'breakout rooms')

- an account of encouraging critical reflection online
- audits of the Faculty's online provision across its different programmes.

Below we look at two examples in more detail.

Example One: Forum investigations

A series of TOP investigations analysed forum messages to look at how tutors intervened in forums. These investigations addressed challenges such as: creating supportive environments, when to intervene, optimal forum size, and encouraging more student discussion.

One investigation, *Use of personal experience,* identified a typology of four tutor intervention styles which the TOP workers named *postman, doorman, professor,* and *weaver.* (For example, a *professor's* message encouraged students to link their claims with theoretical material.) The typology emerged from the data analysis rather than being imposed on the data.

Two TOP workers employed on a large-population student forum realised that there were few opportunities for other large-population forum moderators to share good practice. They initiated the *Elephants and Eggshells* project which addressed this need through a forum for sharing ideas, a literature review about large-scale forum work and a project guide which included 'key tips' for moderating such forums (internal document). The guide covered topics such as modelling, phrasing messages, setting expectations through message titles and dealing with challenging posts.

Example Two: Interactive synchronous online tutoring

In the OU, where 'content' material is provided through the module materials, one key aim of tutorials is to ensure students can work with module ideas, articulating their understanding.

Many OU tutors were very experienced in offering face-to-face tuition but were new to synchronous online tuition. Sometimes tutors reported this meant online tutorials lacked the interactivity achieved in face-to-face tutorials and in effect became 'mini-lectures'. Tutors were asking "how on earth do I get students to interact rather than experience death by PowerPoint?"

To respond to this need, TOP workers produced a guide *OU Live: Encouraging Interaction*, offering good practice ideas and technical know-how to create interactive online tutorials (internal document). The guide included suggestions for encouraging greater student discussion and for increasing participation through, for example, use of quizzes, crosswords and breakout rooms. Being shown 'how to' was intended to give tutors the confidence to experiment with more innovative approaches.

Developing practice and achieving influence

As Cowan et al. (2004) indicate, valuable scholarship findings may go unheeded unless meaningful channels of dissemination exist. An essential part of the TOP initiative was ensuring that findings reached relevant audiences and informed practice. These audiences included:

- tutors
- Staff Tutors
- module teams
- the wider University.

TOP workers used a dedicated website to share their work with these staff. The website included all TOP reports, Top Tips documents, newsletters and an asynchronous discussion forum. To signal the Faculty's 'buy-in', the TOP website link was provided as a tutor resource on all the Faculty's module websites. In addition, a TOP worker ran regular online synchronous events for the wider tutor population to discuss good practice ideas.

TOP workers also shared their findings at module briefings, staff development workshops, and via posters, the OU Scholarship Exchange sharepoint, and an online resource bank of activities (the 'Treasure Chest') so that staff new to online tuition were able to draw on this emerging body of knowledge. For example, during year one of the new module, tutors made use of the Treasure Chest for over three-quarters of their forum activities.

TOP workers influenced the design of online tuition provision on a range of modules in FHSC and other faculties. TOP audits of forum provision - such as Barnes and Sainsbury (2013, as cited in Thorpe, 2014) – were used to review online provision within FHSC

and fed into wider policy discussions across the University. A reflective article drawing on a project about breakout rooms in synchronous online tutorials was published externally (Chandler, 2016).

Such dissemination was largely made possible because of the Steering Group members' influence and links with key decision-makers. Staff Tutors on the Steering Group invited TOP workers to deliver workshops, central academics invited them to key meetings and planning events. Steering Group members themselves also publicised the work of TOP among colleagues to inform central and regional decision-making. The reflections from the TOP Convenor and Steering Group members show how the TOP approach to scholarship impacted on their own and others' practice.

Convenor's reflections

Two particular aspects about TOP's scholarship support approach are worth highlighting. Firstly, TOP workers became more confident in their online skills as a result of TOP membership. This led to several workers being invited (often by Steering Group recommendation) to join other teams or contribute to staff training in other areas. Being identified in this way as online 'experts' consequently increased their influence across the University.

Secondly, the context required creative approaches to ensure workers new to scholarship were supported and encouraged to complete projects. Since the contracts of ten days were brief and spread across a year, this meant maintaining momentum was a key issue – it was easy to let TOP work drift. In addition, the impossibility of the team meeting face-to-face, because of its geographical distribution, was challenging. The following approaches helped overcome such issues.

- Sharing written applications for TOP after appointment: whilst this is not usually done in the working world, we found this a valuable way to get to know each other's interests and strengths quickly at a distance, and bond as a 'team'.
- Sharing expertise: workers who had previously used particular scholarship methods, such as reflective diaries or thematic analyses of message threads for TOP work, advised other workers on their effective use.
- Peer-reviewing drafts: this helped workers prepare for Steering Group meetings.
- Using technology flexibly to keep in contact: an online forum and the TOP website ensured accurate recording of our work; phone calls or synchronous online meetings helped maintain momentum.
- Joint-working: whilst most TOP workers carried out their own investigations, two workers undertook multiple joint-investigations because this increased their motivation.
- The supporting nature of the Steering Group: this was probably the most crucial of all the supports. Steering Group members encouraged and offered detailed, constructive criticism. TOP workers were frequently surprised by the willingness of key professionals from across the University, experts in their fields, to contribute to workers' small-scale investigations.

With this support TOP projects were generally successfully completed although occasionally a project needed additional input or was unfinished. For instance, despite the best efforts of the group, sometimes lack of confidence in producing reports, or difficulties in responding to guidance, could not be overcome.

Steering Group's reflections

As TOP came to a close, Steering Group members provided feedback on how TOP had impacted on their practice and their ability to influence others.

Steering Group meetings provided opportunities for fruitful discussions and all members felt they gained valuable insights that informed their practice. TOP brought together staff in different roles across the University in "a sustained collaborative effort to improve key aspects of pedagogy". One academic commented that he was not aware of any similar initiatives existing elsewhere in the University. TOP's bottom-up nature was especially valued. Another strength was that this close-up engagement enabled staff to better understand the context and particular conditions of teaching within the Faculty. This was important and informed the work of, for example, a Steering Group member whose remit it was to analyse and interpret the Virtual Learning Environment data for Faculty modules.

Through their different roles in the University, Steering Group members were able and eager to take forward TOP's work in various ways.

A long-term group member and Staff Tutor reported that her TOP involvement was invaluable. The insights gained helped her support her tutors in their online teaching and student support as this became a growing feature of their work. For instance, when online forums were first introduced on modules where she was managing tutors, she was able to support them in developing their moderating skills. Subsequently some modules adopted larger region-wide forums comprising several tutor groups. These required different ways of working from individual tutor group forums. Her access to a TOP study on moderating large-scale forums, *Elephants and Eggshells* (Example 1 above), helped her in advising her tutors, for instance, on how to effectively start up and encourage participation in these forums. She also referred them to reports and other TOP website resources prior to and during Career Development and Staff Appraisal (CDSA) discussions, to support their development planning.

Additionally, she ran a successful staff development workshop, led by the TOP Convenor, in her region for tutors. This drew on the typology of intervention styles (Example 1 above). Feedback on this event revealed it had re-energised and re-enthused the tutors in their forum work. Due to its success, a similar session was repeated cross-faculty in the region.

She also alerted fellow Staff Tutor colleagues to TOP's work by ensuring that it was publicised on a Faculty staff website.

A Steering Group member responsible for tutor support and professional development reported learning a great deal from TOP investigations. She involved TOP workers in various aspects of staff development including online training for tutors and other staff, and provision of one-to-one support on technical and pedagogic issues. She often held up the TOP model as an exemplar for involving tutors in scholarship. The insights she gained from TOP investigations fed into workshops both internally and externally. For example, she used the TOP typology of tutor interventions for an external workshop at a Scottish University staff development conference.

Another founding Steering Group member, a lecturer in Learning and Teaching Technologies, drew on TOP findings in her practice to help influence others. For example, as good practice emerged she included examples, such as Top Tips for forum moderation, in module tutor guides, and reported findings at module, Faculty and working group meetings. This sometimes involved convincing others about the relevance of the findings to their own roles when this might not have been immediately obvious. When organising University-wide staff development events, attracting academics, learning designers, and those involved in implementing systems and services, she invited TOP workers to present. Their presentations provided an evidence-base to inform wider debates and decisions about online tuition policy and practice.

Another Steering Group member, a senior academic with expertise in online teaching, commented on the high quality of TOP work and the discussions it prompted. In her view the Faculty had "used TOP to move into the frontline of online tuition and indeed beyond that into research and scholarship on this topic". She highlighted how a specific project (Example 2 above) was helping to explore a key issue in the practice and research of educational web conferencing and in a recent research proposal had referred colleagues to it.

Hence TOP helped both workers and Steering Group members develop their own practice and support others to succeed in the challenging area of online tuition.

Discussion

TOP illustrates the relevance of the theoretical material on 'communities of practice' and 'landscapes of practice' for scholarship in higher education. According to Wenger et al. (2002):

> *Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on a regular basis.* (p.4)

TOP workers and Steering Group members shared a common concern for developing expertise in online teaching and learning. This, and their interactions to deepen that understanding, were the basis of their claim to be a community of practice. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015b) also point to the importance of autonomy, informality and crossing of boundaries in communities of practice. All these were important aspects of TOP. The *autonomy* which workers had, allowed them to choose topics of personal interest, aiding motivation. There was an *informality* of relationships in the community, with participants respecting and acknowledging each other's areas of expertise. *Crossing of boundaries* ensured Steering Group members sought the advice of workers as well as vice versa, leading to mutually beneficial interactions – which Cambridge et al. (2005) see as important in communities of practice.

A further characteristic of TOP was the acknowledgement of relational expertise, that is, the ability to see how your own expertise relates to that of other professions. Edwards (2011) argues that practitioners learn to use relational expertise whilst working on the boundaries of their professions. The TOP workers carried a particular type of expertise due to their direct contact with students online and the members of the Steering Group were able to benefit from that tutor expertise, incorporating insights into their own work.

However, TOP's approach meant that its scholarship findings were not restricted to the TOP community. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015a) argue that it is too simplistic to view communities of practice as operating in isolation. Instead, a profession's body of knowledge is made up of multiple interconnected communities of practice and their boundaries – *landscapes of practice*. Because TOP workers and Steering Group members belonged to multiple communities of practice in this way, TOP had a wider influence across the University.

TOP workers' membership of the wider tutor community ensured any new practice ideas which TOP produced were more readily accepted by that community. This was *peer* support rather than imposed from above. As one Staff Tutor commented:

> *TOP investigations are 'bottom-up', grounded in [tutors'] direct experience. An issue coming up frequently in my [tutor] CDSAs has been the difficulty in getting students to engage in [online synchronous] tutorials and to work interactively when they do. News of a TOP study [Example 2 above] to encourage active learning was therefore welcomed [by tutors]; a response to a perceived need expressed by tutors.*

The bottom-up approach also meant the TOP workers could continually consult their fellow tutors, as part of their scholarship investigations, encouraging collaboration. Beetham, Falconer, McGill, and Littlejohn (2012) point to the potential for technology to promote more collaborative ways of working in teaching communities. As an example, the online 'Treasure Chest' resource bank was set up to allow for input from other tutors – their own bank which they could continue to develop.

Harteis and Billet (2008) point to the importance of the workplace as a setting for creating new learning, rather than simply for applying existing knowledge. Having the TOP team available ensured new knowledge and expertise could be constructed in shared spaces – the tutor forums and staff development workshops. These workshops were designed to gather approaches and ideas, rather than present pre-determined solutions. They used practical *artefacts* which Eraut (2009) sees as important in stimulating discussion and practice development within the teaching community. The artefacts were derived from TOP scholarship investigations, for example, a forum welcome message or an illustrative online discussion thread. The artefact would be the stimulus for the workshop discussion and from the discussion, TOP workers could draw out general principles. Because such principles were derived from authentic examples, generated by peers in the community, this made them persuasive.

The online activities collected in the resource bank and at staff development workshops developed out of pedagogical need – tutors' wishes to support their students' acquisition of key concepts and skills. Kirkwood and Price (2012) point to the importance of emphasising such pedagogy in online teaching and learning rather than focusing purely on increasing the use of technological tools.

In the literature on landscapes of practice, Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015a) refer to the importance of 'brokers' – who work between communities of practice, articulating the expertise of each. Brokers typically facilitate activities which enable cross-boundary discussions to develop mutual understanding when different communities have different languages and ways of practising. Steering Group meetings were an example of such an 'activity' where the communities of central academics, Staff Tutors and tutors were all represented. The meetings allowed each group to articulate the ways of working in their own communities. For example, one TOP worker explained how a Staff Tutor's description of her role in CDSA had helped her understand how she could present more effectively at a regional workshop. The Staff Tutor's comments had also given her confidence that her TOP investigation was of wider relevance and would be welcomed by tutors and management alike.

Steering Group members were part of other communities of practice, such as teams designing new modules and groups shaping Faculty policy, so their role as brokers was crucial. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015a) highlight how some landscape members hold *competence* (expertise derived from their community) and *knowledgeability* (an insightful awareness of the *landscape* practices). The Steering Group members, through their work in TOP, strengthened their competence in online teaching and learning and their knowledgeability about how this impacted on tutors' practice. Without such brokers, who had their roots in other communities, TOP's knowledge and influence would have been restricted to the communities it already had access to.

Food for thought

Having explored the experiences of TOP as a scholarship approach, we suggest the following implications for scholarship models elsewhere:

- Support structures around scholarship can be crucial in ensuring successful dissemination.
- A community of practice can offer such support.
- The community will benefit from a group's longevity even if the members change.
- Longevity allows the community to develop its own shared practices.
- Communities exist in landscapes of practice so the support structures should include a wide range of staff.
- Including staff from diverse roles can improve understanding of each other's responsibilities and perspectives.
- This diversity means results can be disseminated more easily into other communities.
- The role of brokers is vital. Brokers can identify where development of knowledge is needed and facilitate activities to ensure this happens.
- Scholarship may be more effective than other methods for introducing change if it operates as peer-to-peer, bottom-up support.
- Bottom-up approaches, using scholarship, may help teaching staff 'own' their practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015a).
- Scholarship studies may be able to influence change quickly and through more informal channels than formal research studies (Price & Kirkwood, 2014).

TOP's experiences also suggest that institutions should consider the following challenges when instigating scholarship projects.

- Staying on target and completing projects is challenging where people are working individually, at a distance. Group support structures are needed.
- A project may be more problematic where a member is less engaged or less open to constructive feedback.
- Writing up scholarship investigations can be intimidating to people lacking experience. Exemplars, peer support and reviews, and regular milestones such as group meetings may be needed.

- Engaging others' interest in scholarship findings from outside their immediate communities can be challenging. Brokers may help by articulating and translating any findings. However, as Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015a) highlight, it is not always possible to succeed due to the problematic nature of cross-boundary work.
- Whilst scholarship initiatives benefit from being bottom-up and non-hierarchical, they require sustained support from senior colleagues including management, for instance, in providing funding and other resources.
- Because of their bottom-up nature, such initiatives may be vulnerable to losing this support. By articulating and sharing the benefits within all layers of management, 'brokers' can play an important part in ensuring support continues.

Conclusion

The TOP approach to scholarship enriched university-wide research and practice in online teaching. For this reason, it has relevance for other institutions seeking to support successful engagement in scholarship work.

The digital learning landscape necessitates ongoing staff development as online technologies and teaching evolve and progress. Consequently, educators need to find ways to enable regular scholarship inquiries to shape new knowledge and practice. Institutions require scholarship to feed into practice and create impact. To achieve this, bottom-up, peer-led (rather than top-down) investigations are able to produce examples of practice that are relevant and persuasive.

Universities may assume that scholarship opportunities exist and will be made use of independently. However, TOP's experience would suggest that it can be beneficial for staff to work on scholarship in a small cohesive group with appropriate support networks. Within such a community of practice, members hold shared responsibility for making it a success, drawing on the skills, strengths, and experience of all. Maximising the longevity of a scholarship group allows its members to benefit from sustained opportunities to explore their topics of inquiry. In turn, as expertise is developed and individual confidence increases, the practitioner is able to take on responsibilities to support others to succeed.

In addition, it is important that the support group provides a suitable context in which scholarship ideas can be nurtured and taken forward. Typically the dissemination stage in scholarship can end abruptly. Supportive networks and opportunities for collaborative discussions, as in the TOP model described here, can help ensure that scholarship findings reach the relevant communities and influence practice in Higher Education Institutions.

Biographies

Fiona Barnes (Associate Lecturer) has been a tutor with the Open University since 1991, working on modules in Health and Social Care, Social Sciences and Education. She was the Convenor of TOP from 2006 to 2015. She has a background in social policy research, social care and primary education. (fiona.barnes@open.ac.uk)

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